The Fifth Commandment

Exodus 20:12

Study

This study examines the Fifth Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." This commandment bridges the first four commandments, which concern our duty to God, and the remaining five, which concern our duty to one another. By placing parents' honor above our duties to fellow human beings, God establishes the family as the foundational institution of human society. We will see that the Fifth Commandment requires far more than outward obedience from children. It calls for sincere and heartfelt reverence, respect, and care that extend throughout life. It applies to young children in the home, to adults caring for aging parents, and, by extension, to all who are placed in positions of legitimate authority.

Our study examines the theological significance of the commandment, its place within the broader structure of the Decalogue, its teaching on the family and authority, and its application to the Church today. The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, calls this "the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2), highlighting both the importance of the obligation and the gracious blessing that comes with faithful obedience. For the believer, the Fifth Commandment reveals God’s design for human relationships and calls us to honor the authorities He has placed over us, beginning in the home and extending to every aspect of life.

Introduction

As we come to the Fifth Commandment, we arrive at a distinct turning point in the Decalogue. The first four commandments concern our relationship to God: whom we worship, how we worship, how we use His name, and how we keep His day. Now, beginning with the Fifth Commandment, God turns our attention to our relationships with one another. Yet even here, the commandment is not merely about human relationships. It is about honoring God by honoring the authorities He has established.

The Fifth Commandment reads, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." These words are simple and direct, yet their

implications are far-reaching. God has placed the command to honor parents at the head of the second table of the law.[1] I believe this is no accident. The family is the first and most basic institution God established. Before there was a church, before there was a government, before any other social structure, there was the family. God created Adam and Eve, joined them together, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. The family was God's idea from the beginning, and it remains the bedrock of human civilization.

Throughout Scripture, the relationship between parents and children mirrors deeper spiritual realities. God reveals Himself as our heavenly Father and calls His people His children. The love, discipline, and instruction that godly parents provide, however imperfectly, reflect the love, discipline, and instruction that God provides for His own. It is no wonder, then, that God places such importance on honoring the parent-child relationship. To dishonor one's parents is, in a very real sense, to dishonor God Himself, who established parental authority as a reflection of His own.

In our day, the family is under great attack from every direction. The culture around us increasingly downplays parental authority, creates rebellion, and redefines the very nature of the God-defined family. Children are taught to question and defy their parents. The elderly are neglected and treated as burdens rather than as a storehouse of wisdom and experience. The evil one delights in the breakdown of the traditional family structure. The Fifth Commandment addresses these issues and calls God's people to a radically different way of living, one that honors parents, respects authority, and reflects the character of God in our relationships.

The Meaning of the Commandment

The Hebrew word translated as "honor" in this commandment is *kabod*, which denotes weight, heaviness, or glory. It is the same root word used to describe God's glory. When God commands us to honor our parents, He is telling us to treat them as weighty, significant, and worthy of respect and esteem. Matthew Henry captures the significance of this commandment well when

[1] The "tables of the law" refer to the two stone tablets on which God wrote the Ten Commandments and gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:18). The first table contains the first four commandments, which govern our relationship with God: having no other gods, making no graven images, not taking God's name in vain, and keeping the Sabbath holy. The second table contains the remaining six commandments, which govern our relationships with other people: honoring parents, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and not coveting. The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," stands at the beginning of the second table, serving as the bridge between our duties to God and our duties to our fellow human beings.

he writes, "The fifth commandment is the first commandment with promise, as the apostle observes. The sum of it is, that we give honor to those to whom honor is due, in the several relations we stand in to them."[2] The opposite of honor is treating someone as light, trivial, or insignificant. To dishonor our parents is to treat them as if they do not matter, as if their role and their God-given authority carry no weight.

This honor encompasses several dimensions. One example is the importance of respect. Children are to show genuine respect for their parents, both in attitude and in action. This means speaking to and about them with courtesy and kindness. It also means listening to their instruction and receiving their correction with a teachable spirit. Proverbs 1:8 says, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching." The wise child recognizes that God has placed parents in their life for a purpose and receives their guidance with gratitude.

Another aspect is honor and obedience. For children still under their parents' care and authority, obedience is the primary way they demonstrate honor. Paul makes this explicit in Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Obedience is not optional. It is the right and proper response of a child to the parents God has given. This obedience is to be given "in the Lord," meaning it flows from recognition that God Himself has established this authority structure for our good.

Honor also includes care and provision. As parents age and their strength diminishes, children are responsible for caring for them. This was well understood in the ancient world, where there were no government programs or retirement and nursing homes to support the elderly. Children were the means of support for their aging parents. The Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for using a religious loophole to avoid caring for their parents. In Mark 7:10-13, He confronted them for declaring their resources "Corban" (devoted to God) to avoid the obligation to support their aging parents. Jesus called this a direct violation of the commandment and an example of how they made the word of God void by their traditions.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 127, provides a thorough summary of the honor the Fifth Commandment requires. It states that the honor due to parents includes "all due

[2] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (1706; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 1:328.

reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense, and maintenance of their persons and authority."[3] This is a comprehensive vision of what it means to honor father and mother.

The Family as God's Institution

To understand the Fifth Commandment properly, we must appreciate the place God has given to the family. The family is not a human invention. It is a divine institution, established by God at creation and woven into the very fabric of human existence. When God made man, He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). God then created Eve and brought her to Adam, establishing the first marriage and the first family.

The family was designed to be the primary setting for raising, instructing, and nurturing children in the faith. God commanded the people of Israel to teach their children diligently. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, we read, "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." The home was to be the school of faith, and parents were to be the primary teachers.

It is important to recognize that this responsibility has never been delegated to the church, the school, or the state. While these institutions may assist in the education and development of children, the primary responsibility for their spiritual instruction belongs to parents. Ephesians 6:4 specifically instructs fathers, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Fathers and mothers are called to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This is a sacred trust that God has given to parents.

The family is also the context in which children first learn about authority, obedience, love, discipline, and forgiveness. How a child relates to his or her parents shapes how that child will eventually relate to teachers, employers, civil authorities, and even God Himself. A child who learns to honor and obey his or her parents is being prepared to live as a responsible, God-fearing

[3] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 127 (1648)

member of society. A child who is permitted to rebel against parental authority will likely carry that rebellious spirit into every other relationship.

John Calvin, commenting on this commandment, writes, "Since the Lord takes pleasure in the preservation of his own ordinance, the degrees of preeminence fixed by him ought to be held inviolable. The sum of it, therefore, will be that we ought to look up to those whom God has set over us and treat them with honor, obedience, and gratitude."[4] Calvin understood that the Fifth Commandment extends beyond the parent-child relationship to encompass all forms of divinely established authority. Yet it begins in the home, because the home is where we first encounter the reality of authority and learn to submit to it.

Honor Throughout the Whole of Life

It is important to recognize that the Fifth Commandment does not expire when a child reaches adulthood. The command to honor father and mother applies throughout life. While the nature of the honor may change as a child grows to maturity, the obligation itself never ceases. A young child honors his parents primarily through obedience. An adult child honors his parents through respect, gratitude, and care.

The Scriptures provide examples of honoring parents at every stage of life. Despite being sold into slavery by his brothers and enduring years of hardship in Egypt, Joseph honored his father Jacob with deep affection and care when they were reunited. He settled his father in the best of the land and provided for him throughout his remaining years (Genesis 47:11-12). Ruth, though not bound by blood to her mother-in-law Naomi, demonstrated extraordinary honor and devotion, saying, "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Her faithful love for Naomi is a wonderful example of the obedience of the Fifth Commandment.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself provides the supreme example of honoring parents. As a child, He was subject to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:51). Even in His final moments on the cross, amid unspeakable agony, He thought of His mother's welfare and entrusted her care to the apostle John. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to

[4] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 11.

his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:26-27). If the Son of God, even while bearing the sins of the world, took care to honor His earthly mother, how much more should we honor the parents God has given us?

Paul addresses this obligation directly in 1 Timothy 5:4, "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God." Caring for aging parents is not merely a cultural expectation. It is an act of godliness that pleases the Lord. Paul goes even further in verse 8, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." These sobering words underscore the seriousness with which God regards the care of family, especially aging parents.

The Broader Application to All Authority

While the Fifth Commandment specifically names father and mother, the Reformed tradition has consistently understood it to extend to all forms of legitimate, God-ordained authority. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 124, explains that by "father and mother" the commandment means "not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God’s ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth."[5] This broader understanding is deeply rooted in Scripture.

In the family, the Fifth Commandment calls children to honor parents and, by extension, grandparents and other family members who hold positions of care and authority. In the church, it calls members to honor pastors, elders, and teachers who labor among them in the Word and doctrine. Paul instructs Timothy, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). The writer of Hebrews adds, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (Hebrews 13:17).

In civil society, the Fifth Commandment calls citizens to honor governing authorities. Romans 13:1-2 states, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority

[5] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 124 (1648)

except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Peter likewise exhorts, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:17). Even when we disagree with those in authority, we are called to show proper respect and honor, recognizing that God has placed them in their positions for His purposes.

Of course, this honor and obedience have limits. When human authority directly contradicts God's clear command, we must obey God rather than man. The apostles demonstrated this principle when the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and the apostles responded, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This is not rebellion. It is a higher obedience, an acknowledgment that all human authority is derived from God and must be exercised under His lordship. When authorities command what God forbids or forbid what God commands, the believer’s ultimate allegiance must be to Christ.

We see this principle at work in our own day. Consider the Christian physician who is called upon to provide abortion services. Though such procedures may be legal under governing authorities, the faithful physician recognizes that taking innocent life is a direct violation of the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13). Many godly physicians have rightly refused to participate in this evil practice, choosing to obey God rather than man, often at great personal and professional cost. Their stand is not one of lawlessness but of conscience, rooted in the conviction that no human law can be obeyed if it violates God’s law.

Violations of the Fifth Commandment

Scripture takes violations of the Fifth Commandment very seriously. Under the Mosaic law, the penalty for striking or cursing one’s parents was death. Exodus 21:15 states, "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death." Exodus 21:17 adds, "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." These severe penalties reveal how gravely God regards dishonor toward parents. While the civil penalties of the Mosaic code are no longer in force for the Church, the moral principle behind them remains. Dishonoring parents is a grievous sin in God's eyes. The famous 19th-century London preacher Charles Spurgeon emphasized the seriousness of this commandment when he declared, "I do not hesitate to say that next to blasphemy against God, there is no sin more exceedingly sinful than undutifulness to parents. It

has ever been reckoned so. When Moses ordained laws for the government of Israel, the punishment of death was appointed for the man who cursed his father or his mother. Disobedience to parents is set side by side with the most heinous of crimes."[6]

The book of Proverbs repeatedly warns against despising or dishonoring parents. Proverbs 30:17 contains a vivid, serious warning: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures." Proverbs 20:20 says, "If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness." Proverbs 19:26 declares, "He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach." These passages leave no doubt that God views contempt for parents as a serious offense.

In the New Testament, Paul includes disobedience to parents among the characteristic sins of fallen humanity. In Romans 1:30, among the marks of those whom God has given over to a debased mind, Paul lists being "disobedient to parents." In 2 Timothy 3:2, describing the terrible conditions of the last days, Paul writes that people will be "disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy." We must note that disobedience to parents is placed alongside the most grievous of sins, a clear indication of how God views this evil practice.

We should also note that parents can violate the spirit of this commandment by provoking their children or failing in their duties. Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger," recognizes that parents have a serious obligation to exercise their authority with love, wisdom, and gentleness. Parents who are harsh, unreasonable, neglectful, or abusive undermine the authority God has given them and make it more difficult for their children to honor this commandment. It is tragic to consider the terrible effects on mistreated and abused children in our society. The Fifth Commandment, when rightly understood, places responsibilities on both parents and children. Fatherless children in America have become epidemic in their proportion. The following statistics, found in a blog titled "The Fatherless Generation,"[7] are heartbreaking. The following statistics, found in The Fatherless Generation, are

[6] Charles H. Spurgeon, "Honour Thy Father and Mother," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 9 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), 253.
[7] "Statistics," *The Fatherless Generation* (WordPress.com, April 27, 2010), https://thefatherlessgeneration.wordpress.com/statistics/.

heartbreaking. According to the US Department of Health and Census data, 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes, which is five times the average. Ninety percent of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes, thirty-two times the average. Eighty-five percent of all children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes, twenty times the average. Eighty percent of rapists with anger problems come from fatherless homes, fourteen times the average. According to the National Principals Association Report, 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes, nine times the average. Perhaps it goes without saying that we desperately need a spiritual awakening in America! Nothing short of that will heal homes torn by divorce and abuse, where children gladly honor their mother and father.

The First Commandment with a Promise

The apostle Paul draws particular attention to the promise associated with the Fifth Commandment. In Ephesians 6:2-3, he writes, "Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Paul is not saying that the other commandments lack blessings. However, the Fifth Commandment is unique in that it contains a specific, stated promise of blessing directly tied to its observance.

In its original context, the promise was tied to life in the Promised Land. Israel was about to enter Canaan, and God told them that the stability and longevity of their national life depended, in part, on the integrity of family relationships. A nation that honored parents and maintained strong families would enjoy God's blessing and prosper in the land. A nation that despised parental authority and allowed family structures to crumble would face decline and ultimately judgment.

The promise reaches beyond the individual. It doesn't imply that every obedient child will necessarily live a long life, but it conveys an enduring truth about God's moral order. When a society honors parents, respects its elders, and upholds strong family ties, it tends to flourish, growing in stability, prosperity, and blessing. But when families are broken, parental authority is dismissed, and the elderly are forgotten, that society begins to unravel. This is more than a sociological statement; it reflects the very design of God's creation.

Thomas Watson captures this well when he writes of the Fifth Commandment that honoring parents brings "a blessing upon the whole life. God often rewards obedient children with long life, prosperity, and honor. But even when He does not grant long life in this world, He gives what is better: eternal life in the world to come."[8] The ultimate promise of the Fifth Commandment, like all of God's promises, finds its fulfillment in Christ. Those who honor their parents out of faith in Christ are promised not merely earthly blessings but an eternal inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

The Fifth Commandment and Christ

As with every commandment, the Fifth Commandment ultimately points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone perfectly fulfilled this command. From His earliest days, He honored His earthly parents. Luke tells us that after the incident in the temple at age twelve, "he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51). The eternal Son of God, through whom all things were made, willingly submitted Himself to the authority of His earthly parents. What a remarkable display of humility and obedience!

More profoundly, Jesus perfectly honored His heavenly Father throughout His entire earthly life. He declared, "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29). In the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the agony of the cross, He prayed, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). His obedience to the Father was complete, unwavering, and carried through to the very end. Philippians 2:8 tells us that "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Christ's perfect obedience to the Father is the very ground of our salvation.

We who trust in Christ are clothed in His righteousness. His perfect keeping of the Fifth Commandment, and indeed all the commandments, is credited to our account by faith. Where we have failed to honor our parents as we should, where we have been disobedient, disrespectful, or neglectful, Christ's perfect obedience covers our sin. This is the glorious truth of the gospel. We are not saved by our commandment keeping but by His. His righteousness becomes ours, and our guilt was laid upon Him at the cross.

[8] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 133.

Yet the gospel does not leave us unchanged. The same grace that forgives us also transforms us. The Holy Spirit works within believers to produce the fruit of obedience, including a growing desire to honor our parents and submit to legitimate authority. We keep this commandment not to earn God's favor but because His favor has already been lavished upon us in Christ. Our obedience is the fruit of gratitude, not the root of acceptance.

Application for the Church Today

How then should we apply the Fifth Commandment in our lives as Christians? The applications are many and deeply practical. We live in a time when family bonds are weakening, respect for elders is disappearing, and our culture celebrates self-determination above all else. The Fifth Commandment calls us to swim against this current.

For young children, the application is straightforward. Obey your parents. Listen to their instructions. Receive their correction with humility. Trust that God has placed them in your life for your good, even when their rules seem unreasonable or their discipline feels unpleasant. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

For adult children, the application takes different forms but is no less important. We must continue to treat our parents with respect, even when we no longer live under their roof or follow their daily direction. We should seek their counsel, value their wisdom, and express our gratitude for the sacrifices they made on our behalf. As they age, we must be attentive to their needs, both physical and emotional. We must resist the temptation, so prevalent in our culture, to view elderly parents as inconveniences rather than as blessings.

For parents and grandparents, the Fifth Commandment carries a corresponding responsibility. We must exercise our authority in ways that make it easier, not harder, for our children to honor us. We must lead with love, instruct with patience, discipline with consistency, and model the Christian life before their eyes. We must avoid the extremes of harshness on one side and permissiveness on the other. Our goal should be to raise our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, pointing them to Christ in all that we say and do.

For the Church as a whole, the Fifth Commandment calls us to honor those whom God has placed in authority over us, whether in the church, the workplace, or civil government. We should pray for our leaders, submit to their lawful authority, and speak of them with respect, even when we disagree. This does not mean blind obedience. It means a respectful, God-honoring posture that recognizes God's sovereignty in all human affairs.

We must also be intentional about caring for the elderly in our congregations. James 1:27 tells us that "religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." The aged among us have much to offer, including their prayers, their wisdom, their example, and their faithfulness. We must not allow them to be forgotten or marginalized. Instead, we should honor them, learn from them, and ensure that they are cared for in their final years.

Conclusion

The Fifth Commandment stands at the intersection of our duty to God and our duty to one another. By commanding us to honor our parents, God establishes the family as the cornerstone of all human society and teaches us the fundamental principle of respect for divinely appointed authority. This commandment reaches into every stage of life and every sphere of human relationships, calling us to honor those whom God has placed over us, beginning with our fathers and mothers.

Throughout Scripture, the honor of parents is treated with the utmost seriousness. Violations of this commandment bring severe consequences, while faithful observance brings the promise of blessing. The commandment reveals God’s heart for strong families, healthy communities, and a rightly ordered society in which authority is exercised with love and received with respect.

For the Church today, the Fifth Commandment calls us to resist the spirit of our age, which despises authority and celebrates independence from every form of accountability. We are called to something different, something better. We are called to honor our parents, care for the elderly, respect our leaders, and submit to the authority structures God has established, all while maintaining our ultimate allegiance to Christ alone.

Ultimately, the Fifth Commandment points us to Jesus Christ, who perfectly honored both His earthly parents and His heavenly Father. Through His obedience, He earned the righteousness that is credited to all who believe in Him. Through His death, He paid the penalty for every time we have failed to honor those God has placed over us. Through His Spirit, He enables us to grow in the grace of honoring others as He has honored the Father.

May we, by the grace of God, be found faithful in keeping this commandment. May we honor our parents with heartfelt respect and tender care. May we submit to lawful authority with a willing spirit. May we raise our children to know and love the Lord, building families that reflect the beauty of God's design. And may we look forward to that eternal day when every relationship will be made perfect, every authority rightly exercised, and every son and daughter of God will honor the Father in whose presence we will dwell forever. To Him be all glory, honor, and praise, both now and forevermore. Amen.

"The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes!" (Psalm 119:64)